

Sept 2002

FLAGSTAFF FIRE DEPARTMENT

FireWise Plantscaping

The threat of destructive wildfire is very real for residents of the Flagstaff area. Wildfire is the #1 fire risk to our community. Homes built in close proximity to naturally occurring flammable fuels are at risk.

Outdoor plantings are an important component of our community. They add shade and beauty, buffer noise, provide privacy and inspiration, and supply habitat for wildlife. Proper selection, placement, and maintenance of landscape plants can provide the desired benefits and not increase the risk to your home. However, improper selection, poor placement, or deficient maintenance of plantings can directly contribute to the destruction of your home during a wildfire event.

There are four attributes of vegetation that should be considered when purchasing, planting, or conducting maintenance that will be adjacent to your home:

LOCATION -- If purchasing a new plant, consider where will it go? If it's an existing plant, where is it at?

Much has been made of clearing vegetation a certain distance from a structure to ensure fire safety. The truth is that vegetation can be within that distance, and even adjacent to the structure, provided it is of the right kind and not part of a continuous "fuel-bed" leading up to the house.

In many areas around Flagstaff, tree density near the home is continuous, drastically reducing the chances of structure survivability during a wildfire. By the same token, a structure fire, when surrounded by dense trees, can readily move into the forest and endanger other homes.

Dense stands of trees should be selectively thinned. Rather than removing trees within only a specific distance from the house, property owners are encouraged to treat their entire property. The Fire Department is available to visit your property and make site-specific recommendations.

Adjacent to your home, consider "specimen" type shrub and tree plantings. Isolate these plantings from others through both horizontal and vertical separation. Use grass, flowers, cinders, or mulch to fill-in the gaps.

TYPE -- What type plant is it? Highly flammable plants -- those high in oils or resins -- should not be planted close to structures. These plants will ignite easier and burn hotter than other types of vegetation. If such plants are already in-place, consider removal. If unable to do so, separate them from other existing vegetation by removal of adjacent plants.

Favor plants which naturally have a high moisture content as evidence by leaves which are often thick, soft, and pliable. Ignition can still occur, but it will take longer and they will not burn as hot.

AMOUNT and ARRANGEMENT -- How large will the plant be and what are it's growth characteristics? Put simply, how much plant material is there to burn?

Large plants are acceptable, provided they are not crowded together in a continuous planting. Tree branches should not interlock and form a closed, continuous canopy overhead. Such an arrangement allows heat and fire to be easily transmitted from one plant to another. Shorter plants should not be placed where their presence could provide a "ladder" for a ground fire to climb higher into adjacent vegetation, thus endangering the home.

Consider plants that are low-growing. If ignited, there will be less material to burn. Be sure to inspect these plants regularly and remove any fallen leaves and needles that might collect under in or under them.

In addition, dead material in plants should be removed during routine maintenance. Weeds and grass should be routinely mowed to a height of four inches or less.

VIGOR -- Healthy plants are better able to withstand the challenges of our environment. Plants should be watered as required. Consider use of native plants, many of which require less water than exotics. Mulch should also be utilized to reduce watering needs: wood chips are OK provided they are placed so not to form a continuous fuelbed leading directly to the house.

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For more information, contact us at:

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